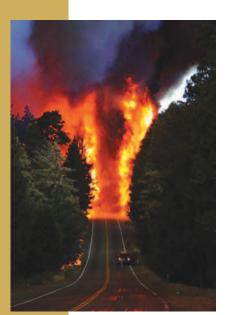
Introduction

The October Fire Siege of 2003 tested the modern fire service like no other time. The combined efforts of the largest wildland fire agencies in the world, the United States Forest Service and the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF), along with armies of local fire departments across the state mustered ground and air resources into the firefight as never before. At the peak of the fire siege over 14,000 firefighters were on the line. Never in California's history were so many homes and



Old Fire crosses Highway 18.

lives in danger by fire at one moment. By the time the 14 major fires were extinguished, 24 lives were lost, 3,710 homes were destroyed and 750,043 acres were blackened. In addition, countless miles of power lines were damaged, communication systems destroyed, watersheds reduced to bare scorched soils and thousands of people were forced into evacuation centers, unsure if they would have a home to return to—many did not.

The Purpose

Although an event of this magnitude is laden with stories of heroism, loss, relief and anguish, the purpose of this document is to objectively capture the events, issues and resulting strategies involved in the siege. It is not about the firefighters on the ground, but about the events and strategic decisions made that mobilized them.

The fire service and citizens threatened by the siege benefited from the foundations built prior to this disaster. FIRESCOPE, the Incident Command System, the California Fire Plan and the National Fire Plan all resulted from lessons learned from previous fires. The tools given to us by our predecessors prepared us for this fire siege. It is our obligation to provide our successors with an even stronger foundation. This document is the beginning of building that foundation.

The Contents

The events leading up to the Fire Siege of 2003 have an undeniable influence on how the incident was managed. In the *Prelude to the Siege* section, some major historic fire events are described. The Prelude describes a selection of previous fires, legislation, programs and projects that impact preplanning and fire attack today.

In planning a fire attack, incident commanders base strategic decisions on numerous factors including community impacts, weather, environment, availability of resources, and social-political

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influences. Many of the day-by-day events and issues that influenced the decisions made by incident commanders are chronicled in the *Daily Update* section.

The *Issues and Strategies* section that follows the chronology is the most important component of this document in reducing the threat of future catastrophe. This section is the result of interviewing 68 key commanders and decision makers within a week of containing the fires. Using their comments, the interviewers identified key social-political issues that impacted the strategic decisions made by

the various incident commanders. Managing a disaster unprecedented in scope, the fire commanders struggled to make the best decision to support the fire fight, on the ground and in the air. If it could have been done better, they want to figure out how.

The Fires

As the fire season of 2003 approached, policy makers understood the potential for a calamitous fire season in Southern California. The dramatic numbers of dead, dying and diseased trees in the wildland/urban interface was obvious and pandemic. With that recognition came action at the federal, state and local levels. Evacuation plans were developed, fuel reduction projects were underway, firefighter staffing was increased and



One of thousands of single family homes destroyed.

citizens were informed. One can only imagine how much worse it could have been without these pre-planning measures—and in hindsight how much more could have been done.

There were 14 fires that are part of the October Fire Siege: Roblar 2, Grand Prix/Padua, Pass, Piru, Verdale, Happy, Old, Simi, Cedar, Paradise, Mountain, Otay and Wellman. The names of some will not be remembered. Others will never be forgotten. Any one of the larger fires would have reduced the state's wildland firefighting forces to minimum draw down (that level where the success of extinguishing a fire with initial attack forces is compromised). With 14 fires burning, not only was initial attack firefighting compromised, but the firefighters and support resources needed for the major fires were depleted.

On October 21, 2003 a fire was ignited in the practice range at Camp Pendleton Marine Corps Base in San Diego County, California. This ignition would be the beginning of the fire siege. The *Roblar 2 Fire*, as it was named, was not unusual for a large fire. But



A CDF inmate fire crew prepares for structure protection on the Cedar Fire.

this fire became important as it began the mobilization of firefighters first from Southern California, then from Northern California, and then from across the United States as 13 more major fires ignited. In this introduction all the fires cannot be mentioned. Here are just a very few:

CEDAR FIRE: The Cedar Fire would prove to be a monster that had no regard for the lives in its path. As night fell on October 25th, incident commanders arrived at a deceptively small, but inaccessible fire making containment impossible. Orders for more firefighters were placed, but by then the numerous firestorms that were burning in Ventura, Los Angeles and San Bernardino Counties had drawn down resources to minimums. By midnight the devil winds hit.

All resources staged for the morning shift were pressed into immediate service. The town of Ramona was threatened and commanders knew they were going to lose homes. With the few resources they had, they did as much as could be done. Bump and run

structure protection tactics were employed. At approximately 2:00 a.m. the Barona Indian Casino in Wildcat Canyon was threatened. The fire was splintering into multiple heads. Evacuation of the Casino was impossible. Sheltering in place was the only option. The fire tore through Wildcat Canyon destroying homes, trapping firefighters, sheriffs and citizens in choking smoke with zero visibility. Fire and law enforcement commanders knew they could not protect all the homes and resorted to search and rescue following behind the flame front, checking for survivors—and victims. As the sun came up the first fatalities were discovered near the Barona Indian Reservation. Many houses were lost, but many more were saved by firefighters. As the east winds started to diminish on Sunday, October 26, crews were able to take the offensive by building firelines on the western flank. They knew the west winds were coming and the heel of the fire would become the new head. The new head indeed materialized and destroyed the community of Cuyamaca and threatened to destroy the historic town of Julian. Structure protection engines were placed in

front of the fire to defend what they could. Gallant efforts were made by crews, many of which had traveled from long distances and were pressed into the fight in unfamiliar country. One such crew was Novato Engine 6162 that was overrun by fire killing one firefighter and injuring the rest of the crew. When this fire was finally contained on November 4, 2003 it was recorded as the largest wildland fire in California's fire history; 273,246 acres consumed, 2,232 homes destroyed, and 14 lives lost.

GRAND PRIX FIRE and OLD FIRE: In San Bernardino County, the Grand Prix Fire and the Old Fire began miles apart from each other on different days. These two fires eventually joined as they swept down on the Incident Command Post. With Santa Ana east winds howling, these two fires ripped through subdivisions at the base of the San Bernardino Mountains. The fire ran through the foothill communities of Devore, Lytle Creek, Del Rosa



Firefighters are silhouetted in front of a blaze on the Old Fire.



House surrounded by Eucalyptus catches fire

and Rancho Cucamonga. The Old Fire looked like a repeat of the 1980 Panorama fire, which destroyed 325 homes. This time, however, there was competition for firefighting resources leaving fewer firefighters to engage the fire. The western flank of the Grand Prix Fire crossed into Los Angeles County. With a vengeance, it threatened one subdivision after another. Finally, the winds died down enough to go on the offensive. With the ceasing of the east winds it was only a matter of time before the prevailing west winds would surface and the vulnerable forest communities including Crest Forest, Running Springs, Lake Arrowhead, Cedar Glen and Mt. Baldy Village would be threatened. The race was on. Law enforcement implemented the Mountain Area Safety Task Force (MAST) evacuation plan which had been written only months before. Firefighters scrambled into the diseased forest to protect the homes and backfire off of Highway 18 under worsening conditions. Hundreds of homes were destroyed, but thousands were saved. No burn fatalities occurred as the largest evacuation in San Bernardino County's history was successfully completed.



A news crew gets some close footage on the Old

SIMI, VERDALE, PIRU FIRES: The fires burning on the Los Angeles and Ventura County line moved at extraordinary rates of spread. The Simi Fire, fanned by Santa Ana winds burned at the incredible rate of 80,000



acres in 16 hours. Contingency plans were developed early on in the firefight to prevent the predictable spread of the fire to the west. Out of the last eight major fires to burn in this area none have ever been contained south of Highway 118. Previous fires had burned all the way to the ocean. The contingency plan called for an aggressive burn out operation along Highway 118 which was implemented and successful. As the fire reversed direction with the changing wind conditions, the community of Stevens Ranch was threatened. Fortunately this community was built with fire safe designs allowing residents to shelter in place and

giving firefighters the opportunity to protect all the structures. For 30 years Ventura County and more recently Los Angeles County have had aggressive fuel reduction programs and defensible space requirements. This contributed to only 37 homes being destroyed even though 6,800 homes were directly in the path of the fire.

The Future

The wildland fire agencies have spent the last 100 years striving to mobilize and engage firefighting resources effectively and safely. Since the "Big Blow Up" of the 1910 fire season, war has been waged on fire. Most of the time California wildland firefighting is an efficient and skilled engagement that saves lives, homes and natural resources. Ninety-seven percent of all wildland

fires in California are extinguished

in the first day

with limited



Firefighters unable to save home.



Major highways across the southland closed.



A U.S. Forest Service Hot Shot Crew gears up and beads for the fireline on the Grand Prix Fire.

destruction. But that is not enough. The threat is great for those fires that escape early control and become major fires. And worse yet, sometimes that threat becomes a conflagration that becomes a catastrophe like those of this siege.

The term "wildland fire" has become a misnomer for most of California. In the past, firefighting efforts focused on perimeter control. Top priority has now been shifted to the protection of the millions of citizens who have moved to the wildland/urban interface. Now confronted with people and homes out in front of the fire, firefighters are forced into a defensive posture, often with their backs against a house defending it. Although the risk will always be present during a firefight, by creating a defensible space around homes and building in fire resistive construction, firefighters are given a chance to save lives and homes without undue risk.

Pre-planning successes like those of the mountain communities of San Bernardino who created the Mountain Area Safety Task Force (MAST), Ventura and Los Angeles County's aggressive vegetation management program, and Fire Safe Councils demonstrate that we can have a positive impact on saving lives and property.

The fires of the October siege are indicative of the future. The way fires burned in the past is how they will burn in the future. Fire officials know that there will continue to be large fires like the Grand Prix that will burn down the San Gabriel and San Bernardino Mountains into the foothill communities. They know that there is potential for a repeat of the deadly

Cedar fire ravaging canyon communities in the rocky terrain of San Diego County. It is understood that the old decadent brush of the mountains above Santa Barbara once again shows great potential for a difficult, destructive fire like the Painted Cave Fire of

1990. Firefighters expect that a fire similar to the Old Fire has the potential to burn through other mountain communities plagued by dying trees like Big Bear, Idllywild and Lake Arrowhead. Will the next fire be in Malibu? Will a fire threaten Ojai? Will it burn in the old Monterey Pine Forest of Cambria or Monterey or could it once again come down on the cities of Southern California? The real question is not where, when, or if the next big fire will occur. The question is, are we prepared for it?

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